

Soil and Water takes on protecting public health

Nutrient management planners learn about 2015 water goals

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Last year was hard for Northeastern Wisconsin farmers, as their livelihood has been put under the microscope by the public they feed. As wells become contaminated from manure spills or runoff and groundwater becomes a constant concern, farmers, landowners and government officials are working out what they need to do to protect the natural resource.

During a nutrient management meeting hosted by the Door County Soil and Water Conservation Department last week, nutrient management planners, agronomists and farmers from Door and Kewaunee counties came to listen to the department's goals for further water contamination prevention in 2015.

"I'm hoping that at the end of 2015, I look back at this meeting as a moment where we changed the direction in part of the program that we all collectively work on and that we can collectively be proud of the improvements and accomplishments we have done," Soil and Water department head William Schuster said.

According to the state Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, Door, Kewaunee and Brown counties have 72-92 percent of cropland under nutrient management plans (NMP). Door County has the second-highest percentage in the state under NMPs at 82 percent, tied with Jefferson County.

"However, we need to do better," Schuster said. "I've said all of us need to step up our game, landowners, farmers, nutrient management planners, haulers, Door County SWCD and Bill Schuster."

Schuster said that all the players are going to change the direction of

nutrient management preparation, manure hauling, compliance, spot checks starting now as a process throughout the next year.

Door County Public Health Department Director Rhonda Kolberg gave a presentation outlining how harmful E. coli can be to the human body, citing different major outbreaks in Milwaukee, Canada and Jacksonport, which were all reported to be sourced from bovine manure.

Kolberg said water can be clear and free of sour smell and still be contaminated.

"By the time you are seeing brown water, the stage of contamination is severe," Kolberg said.

The Soil and Water Department walked attendees through an extensive look at randomly selected farm fields in Door County with NMPs. They discussed different aspects of sediment, erosion, field changes over time, contemporary land use, bedrock, sinkholes, weather and land features in perspective of spreading manure.

This year, Soil and Water staff will be doing focused audits of NMPs, prioritizing them by volume of manure produced on a farm. All details of the plans will be looked over, including farm walk-overs, to determine whether plans are in compliance. If a plan is not in compliance, manure cannot be spread until the plan is revised.

Schuster went over how spot checks will work, the responsibilities of the landowner, planner and hauler, plan submissions and emergency hauling. The end note was that all the changes are not going to happen in a week, but will take time and hard work, but it is to ensure safety of the public and keep agriculture as one of the area's economic drivers.

SWDC is also looking forward to promoting standards for hauling in different geographical regions across the state, with the goal of having an open process on how to prevent further water pollution.

Benjamin Todd Koss, owner of Koss Ag LLC, a nutrient management planner, attended the SWDC meeting and he thought it is a good starting point for the industry. Koss has clients in Door, Kewaunee, Brown, Oconto and Marinette counties, including six large farms ranging from 800 to 5,000 cows, and he manages 30 NMPs for farms of all sizes.

"I think it was a really good meeting; I think things got aired out," Koss said. "We need to move forward and protect the environment. We also need to get our work done in a responsible manner."

Koss commented that there will always be controversy, and things will sometimes go wrong, but farmers and planners are using best management practices. He said there is a learning curve, and they will get better as they go along so this is no longer a problem in the future.

"I want to put out a good product. I appreciate it when people tell me it's not as good as they would like. That way I can get better," Koss said. "This meeting is helping me, as a plan writer, as to how I can be better."

Soil and Water vowed to help farmers and planners as much as possible to make sure they have all the tools necessary to continue protecting groundwater and fields from runoff.

"It's your responsibility to go out and look at these fields, but we are going to help provide you with as much documented information necessary and we're going to talk about training and assistance," Schuster said.

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